

tool on which the work was carried out, consisted of a trestle on which were screwed three blocks, each one set with highly polished, home-made nails arranged in rows like the teeth in a series of combs. The result of drawing the flax through these iron combs, first through the one with the widest spacing and then progressively on to the finest, was exactly like that of combing a woman's hair. The first and second combings removed the last vestiges of foreign matter and the coarser, shorter fibres, leaving great snarls of it in the hatchel. These snarls, called "tow," were carefully set aside and saved, to be later woven into various fabrics in which roughness and coarseness of texture were not considered a drawback. Nothing was ever wasted, particularly no part of a material which required so much work to transform it from a plant fibre into a piece of cloth. The "hatcheller" had to be very deft, for in unskilled hands the flax was apt to turn entirely into tow, a product which, while useful, was not the be-all and end-all of flax-growing. Hatchelling was "woman's work" to be carried on in the attic. The operator took the comparatively small mass of fibres remaining in her hand after the passage through the finest set of nails, and twisted its smooth, blond and shining strands into neat spiral hanks. These were tied with cord and hung from the attic rafters. If the fibres were long, she might give them an approving glance—allowing herself a moment of pause in the grim task of turning the flax plant into linen—this task which had begun in April and in November was far from completed.

The flax twists must now be spun into the finest of yarn, and the work of spinning would take up the freer moments of most of the family. Pennsylvania German families had a proverb which indicated the time they allotted to the annual spinning: "*Lichtmess, Spinna vergess. Un's Fuder halwer g'fress.*" They aspired to complete the yearly spinning by Candlemas Day, having begun it on Hallowe'en. Flax culture is ancient, and it is natural that superstitions should cling to it. The Pennsylvania Germans believed that in order to secure a good crop of flax, it was necessary to bake a batch of doughnuts on Shrove Tuesday. If you wanted to have a good long flax, it was important to hand out doughnuts generously to friends and neighbors.

Although the more active members of the family devoted only their evenings to the spinning, elderly women might busy themselves all day at the wheel, whose monotonous droning or squeaking was an expected part of the ordinary household sounds. Under the faint and flickering light of a fat-lamp one might see four or five spinning wheels at work: the young girls would be preparing the yarn for their dower linens, the mother would be about her perennial task of keeping her family clothed; an elderly woman would be spinning away at the tow. The coarse yarn spun from the tow would be woven into heavy bags in which to carry grain to the mill, or it became the linen warp which later, with woolen woof, was woven into the sturdy material called linsey-woolsey, a fabric in which all pioneer farm folk were clothed. Tow was used both as warp and woof to make a rough fabric for working clothes, known locally as "*werk-tuch*." At an auction of a farmer's "movables" in 1751, ten yards of it brought 13 shillings.